HEART OF DARKNESS: A SELECTION OF REVIEW EXTRACTS

Opera Today (4 November 2011)

“Robert Innes Hopkins’ stage designs and Rick Fisher’s lighting skilfully allow for slick, convincing shift between times and locations, the Thames estuary and the Central African interior. The predominantly darkened set is occasionally illuminated or washed by a disturbing glow, as when, for example, a luminous miasma hovers ominously and eerily above the stage. The water-borne platform of the ship’s deck rolls and lurches to the lapping rhythms of the river.

The composer has skilfully evoked place and ambience with precision and impact. Harp, celeste, guitar and energetic percussion underscore the heat and mystery of the Congolese jungle. In contrast, the arrival of the long awaited “rivets” which will enable [the crew] to continue their journey to the heart of the interior herald a riotous dance of glee, a momentary alleviation of the oppressive spirit of anxiety and danger which overshadows their passage”.

This is a thrilling new work, in a brilliantly realised production.”

The Stage (2 November 2011)

“O’Regan and Phillips have created an atmospheric psychological drama - Phillips allowing himself to use only Conrad’s words, whether from the book or his navigational diaries – and both music and words to varying degrees throw up motifs, which occasionally expand to become mantras.

Solidly conducted by Oliver Gooch, the ensemble CHROMA and the fine cast are firmly grounded by Alan Oke’s Marlow, whose clean expression suggests a captain who has lost something of his self through his African experience … .”

The Independent on Sunday (6 November 2011)

“The craftsmanship of this first opera is indubitable, the horror muted by curatorial delicacy. …… The casting is colour-blind in Edward Dick’s simple production, with Njabulo Madlala as the Thames Captain and Sipho Fubesi doubling as the Company Secretary and Manager, while the “barbarous and superb” River-Woman (Gweneth-Ann Jeffers, doubling as Kurtz’s white fiancée) is afforded an elemental lament. It is, of course, wordless – a monumental vocalise – for Conrad gave few words to those who suffered at the hands of the Belgian traders.

Well sung and acted by Opera East’s ensemble cast and handsomely played by Chroma under Oliver Gooch, Heart of Darkness is an auspicious debut.”

The Observer (6 November 2011)

“The brilliance of Tarik O’Regan and Tom Phillips’s new chamber opera lies in its ability to convey all the horror without the compulsion to show it – the ultimate psychodrama – and to employ music of startling beauty to tell such a brutal tale.

Underpinning all of this is a score of concise originality. Restless, leaping woodwind propel the narrative through the murky waters of the Congo, while interesting combinations of sonorities –
double bass and classical guitar for instance – trickle and bubble through the music. Just fourteen instrumentalists keep the singers afloat on this quirkily beautiful raft, expertly steered by conductor Oliver Gooch.”

The Classical Source (5 November 2011)

“The text of the libretto is one of the best I have heard in English: nothing is poetic, the composer’s job is never superseded and Phillips’s economy of words is authoritative. …… This language-sensitive creative team seizes on the musical potential of a single word, “rivets” and constructs an entire dance around it.

…… this is a terrific new work, intelligently staged and magnificently performed by some fine singers and by the richly committed instrumentalists. Taken as a whole, Heart of Darknes has more going for it than many new operas, and I left the auditorium longing to hear it again – preferably immediately, certainly soon.”

Time Out (10 November 2011)

“Tarik O’Regan’s adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s novella looks and sounds terrific in this production by Opera East and ROH2. The music is a revelation – the brooding soundscape gleams and darkens like tropical light playing on the surface of the endless river up which narrator Morlow sets off in his riverboat. The pulsing rhythms that accompany the recitatives, based on ethnographical recordings from the Congo, heightening the expectation of what he might find at his journey’s end. All this is achieved through dextrous use of chamber orchestra Chroma, expertly conducted by Oliver Gooch. The strong cast is led by Alan Oke’s luminous tenor ….”